

Home Again

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by Kyle Eggleston

Crimson Gamma orbited high above the Shuka home world. It was the early hours of morning. Life on the station was starting to liven up for the day. People were crawling out of beds, going home from a late night of partying, doing whatever it took to get home so they could start their day. The dock workers were known to party hard into the late night and be up bright and early for their shifts. As long as they did their job no one cared.

Madison stood in a small observation dome looking over the dock. They had packages and shipping crates to move quickly as more would be coming shortly. She liked her dock run in a smooth orderly fashion. Madison hardly had any issues when it came to her workers, they were people she could count on and trust. They were dependable. It wasn't the ideal job, nothing like command of a star ship or the like, but it paid the bills.

As a shipping container came through customs, Madison looked at it and paused. Something felt off, something didn't sit right with her.

"Hold that container there. I'm coming down." She said as she made her way down to the main dock area.

The workers did as they were told. The shipping crate was of normal size. Nothing seemed to look out of the ordinary yet there was something. As Madison approached the container, she touched the side of it. It was cold to the touch almost frozen. Usually shipping containers were warm from the atmosphere in the dock area. But this one was quite cold like it had been out alone in space for a spell.

There was an access panel that would activate and deactivate a small force field and open the container's door. She activated the sequence. As the door opened, a fog escaped from the container. Alarms sounded at the possibility of hazardous materials filling the area. Madison grabbed a gas mask and placed it over her face, other workers did so as well.

"Lock it down!" She yelled through the mask.

A force field lowered into place over the shipping container locking Madison inside with it. She turned to escape, but couldn't due to the force field. "Hey! Let me out of here!" She yelled.

A nearby dock worker tried to adjust the field without success. “Sorry ma’am, it’s locked in place. I’m trying.” He tried a few more combinations but none of it did anything to help change her current situation.

Madison couldn’t breathe. Her gas mask did nothing to keep the fog from getting into her lungs. She passed out within minutes and began convulsing. As the fog lifted and the force field dropped, the dock worker who was trying to help her rushed to her side.

“Get Med Bay on the horn. Now!” He said.

* * *

Med Bay was quiet. Doctor Allen was working on a pet project he had wanted to finish for a few weeks now. It had to do with gene splicing. Not quite approved by the regulations, but not disallowed either. Genetic manipulation was frowned upon by most of the Earth Force Alliance. Yet there were some who agreed that research needed to be done in order to determine how much was safe and how much wasn’t. Thus he could perform his research as he saw fit.

Matt’s concentration was cut short as two dock workers wheeled a patient in. He recognized her has the dock leader. Madison. Matt stood from his work station and hurried over to where she was laying. Picking up a scanner he ran it over her body. Her heart rate was non existent and her breathing was shallow. She was lifeless. Not a muscle in her body was twitching even. If Matt didn’t have his scanner, he would have thought she was dead.

“Let’s jump her heart.” He said pulling out two paddles and placing them on her chest. “Clear!”

Activating the paddles they sent an electric shock throughout Madison’s body. Her body lurched up a few inches and rested back on the bed. Matt charged the paddles again, and again shocked her system. A faint heart rhythm began to flow. He set the paddles aside.

Madison coughed as she opened her eyes. “What? What happened?”

Matt shook his head. “I wish you could tell me. Your workers say you collapsed from some kind of fog.”

Madison sat up on the bed. Her eyes glowed white. “The fog is me.” She said. “I am the fog.” Looking around she noted her surroundings. “This place is unfamiliar to me. What is its purpose?”

Matt was confused by the question. Did she mean the station or the Med Bay? He wasn't sure. What he did know was she was not herself. Possibly possessed by some alien force? He didn't know. But he needed security asap.

"Doctor Allen to security, need you here on the double."

Killpack acknowledged the order. "On my way." He said over the comm unit.

Madison, or rather the one inhabiting her body, looked at Allen. She closed her eyes and waited for security to show up. She didn't need to speak with anyone. Her time was not yet come to do that. It would eventually come, but now was not that time. Walking into the surgical bay, she locked herself in; isolating herself from the rest of the Med Bay.

Moments later, Killpack arrived with two security guards. Stepping one foot inside Med Bay, they could tell what was wrong without asking. Their mouths dropped open at the sight of Madison's transformation.

Madison had electricity flowing through her body. It made her thick red hair stand on end. Her eyes were still glowing bright white. You could see no color in them.

Killpack stepped towards the intercom. "Madison, can you hear me?"

Madison looked at Killpack through the glass and nodded. "Yes, this body can hear you lieutenant." She looked at the two security officers and their weapons. "Those are not necessary." Madison blinked and their guns went flying across the room. "There, much better."

Killpack lowered his own weapon. If Madison could move things with her mind, he wasn't about to find out what she would do to him. He took a good step back to distance himself from her and whatever had possessed her body.

"You will take me to my people." Madison said. Her voice echoed throughout Med Bay and down the corridor. "Once I am with them, I can rest. I can be free of this corporeal nature."

Killpack looked to Allen, the two shrugged. They had no clue what on earth she was talking about. If her tone was any indication, she seemed rather ticked off at the moment. Whatever it was she wanted, it seemed important to her.

"Think we should call the commander?" Killpack asked Allen.

Doctor Allen nodded his head. "Already did. She should be on her way."

"Corporeal nature." Matt Allen repeated. "So you were locked inside of someone else, in that shipping container? Is that it?"

Madison nodded her head. “I was imprisoned. Forced to live out my existence in a single state. Unable to move or speak for I was in the deceased. Now I have this body to convey my thoughts and feelings to you, and I just want to go home.” She said.

“Are you able to leave our friend?” Matt asked. “Can you exist without a body?”

Madison’s eyes fluttered. “I can. I choose not to for the time being. I need this body to make sure you give me what I want.” She turned her head towards a monitor and blinked. An image of a planet appeared on the screen. “That is my home.” She said gesturing to the monitor.

Killpack had been around the block a few times, universe speaking wise, and he had never seen that planet before in his life. He figured it must be beyond the Galactic Rim, the area of known explored space. They didn’t have any ships beyond the Galactic Rim, at least none that he knew of. Too many ghost stories kept people away from it. The Rim scared people to death.

“Take me to my people, my home, and I will leave this body back to your hands.” Madison said matter-of-factly. She meant business and wasn’t messing around. “If you don’t, I will destroy this body and inhabit another one until you do as I say.”

There was the threat Killpack was worried about. Either you do what I say or I’ll cause harm to those you care about. It was the oldest trick in the book, one that hardly ever worked. But it didn’t stop people, or aliens, from trying it out. He hated threats, especially those against coworkers. Sure the dockers didn’t always get along with the command staff, but it wasn’t their job to get along. It was their job to get things done. In this case, he had a job to do and he was damned sure to do it.

“What fresh hell do we have going on in here.” Commander Monson entered Med Bay looking quite perplexed.

Madison watched as Kate entered the Med Bay. “Kate, it’s about time you showed up.”

“Madison?” Kate asked.

“More or less.” Madison responded. “If you give me what I want, you’ll have your dock worker back unharmed.” She threatened.

“What you want is difficult.” Kate said. “We can provide you with a ship, but you must leave my crew member unharmed.”

Kate knew it was a stretch. In order for the entity within Madison to pilot the ship, she would need a body and as luck would have it she had Madison’s body under her control. Kate couldn’t ask anyone else of her crew to allow the creature to inhabit their body. It wasn’t that kind of volunteer mission. She could offer the entity her own body, but who knows what havoc

it would cause with the command clearances she held. No, she would have to figure out a different way to get through this crisis. Madison was a good dock worker, Kate didn't want to have to train another one to replace her.

“A ship.” Madison said. “And who will be my vessel for this voyage to my home world?”

Kate thought about it for a moment, and then had a thought. If this entity could manipulate matter to move it, she should be able to control any device, even a robot. “I will give you a robot body to navigate the ship.” She said. “You should be able to move the necessary parts in order to pilot the craft, yes?”

Madison thought about it for a moment. True it was possible, but not as easy if she had a biological host. But she was begging for help after all, and she couldn't choose which vessel they would offer her. “I will take your android body.” She said.

“I will make preparations.” Kate said. “It will take an hour. In the mean time, can't you just I don't know, leave my worker's body and just float there? I promise you won't be harmed.”

“No.” Madison said. “I need to rest and gather my strength for the journey that lies ahead of me. I will need this body in order to do that.” She paused. “One hour.” Closing her eyes, she entered a state of meditation to conserve her energy.

Turning to Doctor Allen, Kate frowned. No amount of whiskey would get her out of this situation. It seemed to be the doctor's answer to everything. “Keep an eye on her, I need to see to getting her that robot and ship. If anything changes, call me.”

Doctor Allen nodded his head. “Aye sir.” He watched Kate leave the Med Bay and sighed. It was always something new happening around the station. For once, he would love to have a peaceful day where he could just work on whatever it was he wanted to work on. Unfortunately today was not that day. Maybe he was in the wrong line of work, nah he loved medicine. It was his passion, it was his duty to help other people.

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Down in back lot twenty-six, Kate was getting an old robot out of storage. Once she found one, she blew some dust off of it. The robot was an older model, didn't have the newest specs but it ran. That was the important thing, it ran. It worked.

Booting up the robot, Kate watched as its eyes lit up a bright yellow color. “Awaiting input.” The robot said.

Kate sighed. She hated these things. Her thought process on them was this, why use a robot when a flesh and blood human would do just as good. Of course this was a different situation, she needed the robot.

“Directive Alpha Six One.” Kate said. “Compute.”

“Acknowledged.” The robot said. “Purging classified records.” A moment later the robot beeped twice indicating it was ready for further instruction.

Kate opened a panel on the robot’s chest and tinkered around a bit. Once she was satisfied with the modifications, she closed the panel. A homing beacon was all she needed. If she was going to let some alien use her equipment, she wanted to know where it was headed. The Rim was a big place, one could easily get lost out there.

Placing the robot on a maintenance sled, she teleported it to the appropriate airlock. Kate left the back lot and headed to the airlock where she would wait for Madison and the alien to show up.

It didn’t take long for Madison to appear. As she walked towards the robot, she let go a sigh. “Is this the best you could do?” She asked Kate clearly annoyed with the robot Kate had found for her.

Kate nodded. “Hey, I gave you a solution for your problem. Don’t like it? Don’t take it and be trapped here forever.”

Madison touched the robot with her hand. The alien’s conscience transferred from Madison over to the robot. Madison fainted and fell down to the deck. Doctor Allen rushed to her side to help her.

The robot stood from the maintenance sled and walked over to Kate. “Thank you.” It said in a mechanical tone. As it walked around, it made a clanking noise against the deck plating. “I will take my leave of you now.” The robot said. It entered the airlock that would take it to the ship Kate provided.

“C&C, this is Commander Monson. The ship at docking port three is ready to leave. Make sure it gets underway.”

“Acknowledged.” A voice said over the comm unit.

Kate watched as the small ship left the station. She hoped the alien would find what it was looking for. She didn’t want to see it again, that was for sure. She was about to turn away as another ship came into view. It was heading for the docking port fast, too fast. If it didn’t slow down, it would collide with the station. Kate braced for impact.

The ship kept coming, it made contact with one of the airlocks making a bigger hole than the airlock was intended to use. A force field dropped into place to prevent the hull breach from venting atmosphere and people into space.

One of the damaged doors of the space pod opened. Four occupants exited the craft. The first was a female Dubor, then two Shukans, and finally a human. Kate did a double take. It was Major O'Brien.

“Major!” Kate exclaimed. “You’re alive!”

O'Brien looked tired and rugged from the trip back to the station. He had been through a hell of a battle just to escape the prison outpost.

Grilka, the Dubor, looked at Kate with suspicion. She was unsure of what to do. Hiding behind Major O'Brien, she cowered.

“It’s okay.” Jack said. “This is my first officer, Lieutenant Commander Monson.” His voice trailed off. “Wait, no, you’re a full commander now?” He asked.

Kate nodded her head as she gestured to her new rank insignia. “Yes sir. I was promoted in your absence, and given temporary command. I happily give you command of your station back sir.” She said. “Now that you’ve made a hole in it, I am more than happy to give you command back.” Kate chuckled to herself.

O'Brien groaned. “Yeah well, we had a hell of a time getting out of there. I’m just glad we’re alive.” He looked to the unconscious body of Madison on the deck. “Looks like you have a story to tell yourself. Is she okay?”

Doctor Allen nodded. “She’ll be fine. It’s a long story.” He said. Two Med Techs arrived with a stretcher. They loaded Madison on the stretcher and carried her away to Med Bay. Doctor Allen followed behind them.

“I guess we’ll have to get caught up.” Jack said.

Kate nodded. “Indeed. It is good to have you back sir.” She said.

Norev looked to Obshi. “If you’ll follow me, I will see that you are assigned quarters while you’re here on the station.”

Obshi nodded, and then looked to O'Brien. “I request Sanctuary.” He said. “I do not wish to return home to my people. They are not my people anymore.”

O'Brien was stunned. He thought Obshi of all people would have wanted to go back to his home after all these years. A hundred cycles was a lot of time for a Shukan to be away from his home. Jack couldn’t help but grant the request. If Obshi didn’t want to return home, who was he to interfere with that.

Taking a final look at the scorched ship in the docking port, O'Brien gestured to it. "Get a team in here. I want that ships database downloaded in its entirety. Who knows what information it could give us."

Grilka nodded. "Oh yes, that is a good idea." She said. "I can assist your team with translation if needed."

O'Brien smiled. "That would be wonderful, thank you Grilka." He said. "But first let's all get down to Med Bay. I'm sure the doctor wants to take a look at us."

They agreed. Prison didn't do them any good. They were malnourished and hungry. Bones had been broken from the punishments handed out by guards, and their escape had been a miracle. They needed some time to rest and acclimate back to life onboard the station. O'Brien feared the stations psych team would want to talk with them as well. He hated the psych team. Jack knew they meant well and had his best interest in mind, but he still couldn't get used to the thought of telling someone his inner most thoughts.

Grilka looked scared at the thought of going to Med Bay. "This Med Bay you speak of, this is where you cut into your cattle?" She pointed to Obshi and Norev "They are cattle. Cutting into them is fine, you will not cut into me."

O'Brien raised his hands up, "No Grilka, no one is going to be cutting into you. Med Bay isn't just for surgery. We just want to make sure you're healthy. Not carrying any diseases that could affect the rest of us, things like that."

She frowned. "You think I am diseased. I am not cattle. Cattle carry diseases."

Jack sighed. This was not going to be easy. "Look, let's just go down to Med Bay. You'll see there is nothing to be concerned about." He began walking towards a transport tube. Grilka, Obshi, and Norev followed him down to Med Bay.

Matt Allen watched as the four people entered his facility. He was happy to see the safe return of the major and the ambassador. He didn't have a clue who the other two people were, but that didn't stop him from performing his duty. They came to him for a reason and he was going to make sure that reason was met.

A few hours later, Matt had all of the results from his tests. They were somewhat healthy for the most part. There was some dehydration here, some missing vitamins there. It could be worse than it was.

"You all check out. You can resume your normal lives." Matt's voice trailed off as he looked at Grilka. What would her normal life look like now? It wasn't up to him, that decision was for the major to make. Matt was glad he didn't have to deal with that.

Grilka looked at O'Brien. "As you can see I am not carrying any disease like I told you. I am not cattle!"

Jack nodded his head. "No, you are not cattle." He agreed. "I'll get you a place to sleep and you'll probably want to wash up. We were in there for quite a while." He smiled "I'll even make sure you have a room with hot running actual water. None of that synthetic crap they pass off as water."

"Water" Grilka said. "To bathe in? You can't be serious."

"I uh, am quite serious." O'Brien responded. "How do you um clean yourselves? I mean from all the dirt and grime that gathers throughout the course of a day."

Grilka giggled. "We um" she started, it was a rather personal and private topic they were discussing after all. "Use a gel on our bodies that gets rid of the dirt and grime as you call it. It keeps us rather clean most of the time. Sometimes we do have to apply it twice on those really bad days." She looked around. "I doubt you have this gel available here."

"No" O'Brien said. "We don't have this gel you speak of. But we might be able to generate some if you have the specific contents of the gel."

Grilka shrugged it off. "Oh don't bother Dorf. I will try bathing like you humans and cattle do. It will be an experience."

Over the next hour, O'Brien arranged living quarters for Grilka. She had no home to go back to. She had helped them escape, an act probably punishable by death on her home world. He wasn't sure, but he had a feeling they didn't take lightly to traitors; and she would definitely classify as a traitor to her home government.

Grilka found the bath to be quite a pleasant experience. It was something she was not accustomed to for sure, but didn't shy away from it. She actually looked forward to doing it again sometime. She headed to the docking port where her ship was located. As promised, she agreed to help the humans figure out its systems and download any information that could be useful. She was only glad to help out. After all they did save her from her own people.

O'Brien paced around C&C. It felt bigger than he remembered. Had the cell really been that cramped? He couldn't recall. Part of him wondered if he was just trying to push the memories out of his mind. Another thing the psych team would want to talk about he was sure.

Jack stopped at the main control station and watched the traffic come to and leave the station. It was a typical day in C&C. Everything by the book, nothing out of the ordinary. He liked it that way when things were peaceful and quiet. No surprises.

A star ship dropped out of FTL and coasted towards the station. Magnifying the ship on his central monitor, Jack frowned. It was a Dubor star ship. Possibly a warship. He wasn't sure. It couldn't be a coincidence that they appeared after he escaped their prison with two of Shuka's most influential people with him.

O'Brien didn't hesitate, he opened a channel to the ship stationed in front of him. "This is Crimson Gamma to the Dubor Star Ship, please state your reason for entering our space."

The ship's image was replaced with that of a man. O'Brien recognized him as Ketish one of Dubor's leaders. His reputation was only known due to Norev's experience with him.

"Cattle have no rights in space." Ketish said. Not quite the opening O'Brien was hoping for. But he would have to make due. "You orbit a world that does not belong to you, human. You are like they are. Cattle to be ruled over. We are here to reclaim what was taken from us."

O'Brien folded his arms across his chest. "You don't have any jurisdiction here either Ketish. The only difference between you and us are, we were invited by the Shuka Religious Government."

Ketish laughed. "We do not recognize the authority of that government. They are cattle and will be treated as such." He said.

Jack wondered if this was the start of the war Ketish himself had warned Norev about. He hoped that wouldn't be the case.

"That matter can rest for now." Ketish said. "I have come on another matter. You have one of my slaves hostage, as well as one of my ships. I demand they be released to me immediately." If looks could kill, Ketish was giving one hell of a stare down. He wasn't in the mood to play games. Ketish wanted what was his and wanted it right now.

O'Brien sighed. "I'm sorry. This slave of yours must have escaped our custody. I don't know of any slaves in my care. The ship you claim is yours was found as salvage. According to the Salvage Act of 2204 we claim rights to it. If we deem it to be worthless, we can return it to you for a modest fee."

Ketish grunted in annoyance. "Do not test me human. I am Ketish, a guard of the Holy Order and I command you to release your prisoner at once."

"There isn't any formal treaty between our two governments." O'Brien said. "In fact I didn't even know you existed over a month ago. My how times change. Tell you what, why don't you and your men enjoy what this station has to offer in ways of luxuries. Rest a bit before turning back to your home world, that sort of thing. Maybe we can get to know one another better."

Ketish's frown returned. "You will not earn our trust this way major." He said. "I will send troops over to assess the situation."

"Fine." O'Brien said. "But they must be unarmed. I do not allow weapons onboard my station. If any of your men even bring a gun, they will be arrested and tried for their crime. Mark my word."

"You speak like a Dubor." Ketish said. "Will you die like one too." He laughed. "Human, perhaps you are not that bad after all. I agree to your terms. No weapons."

As the comm channel closed, O'Brien let out a long slow breath. What on earth did he just agree to? Had he gone mad letting them board the station? He hoped this was the right course of action to allow for peace between their two people. He wanted some kind of peace between their two peoples even though he was just their prisoner over twenty-four hours ago.

"Commander Monson." O'Brien said. "Keep an eye on her. If she locks weapons, destroy her."

Kate nodded. "Aye sir."

"I'll be with our guest." Jack said as he left C&C.

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Grilka walked frantically back and forth in her quarters. It was too good to be true, she knew it from the start. If only she had listened to her own thoughts and not these humans, things might have turned out differently. But no, she had to trust them. Had to follow them back to their station where now she was being hunted by her own people. There would be no escaping this, she would stand trial for treason; and she would lose. She rubbed her head ridges in an attempt to calm herself, it wasn't doing any good.

"They will find me. They will kill me." She said.

O'Brien shook his head. "No they won't. They don't have any weapons on them. I saw to that." He tried to comfort her to the best of his ability.

Grilka swore under her breath. "Never trust cattle. They don't ever do you any good." She stopped pacing and faced O'Brien. "You have got to hide me."

Jack nodded. "If you stay in your quarters I will post a guard to watch you around the clock until they leave. You'll be safe here. I promise." He said.

"Promises." Grilka repeated. "I have heard of such promises before. That is how I ended up being a guard down in the prison. They said I would be safe there, and then you came." She

looked Jack squarely in the eyes. "I was unaware of other species before you. You changed that and I hate you for it."

Jack frowned at the thought. Here he thought he was doing Grilka a service by helping her escape from her own people. Maybe he misjudged the situation and she had been better off back with them. He couldn't get into a fighting match with his brain at that moment, there were too many moving parts going on. He didn't want to have to deal with that as well.

"Grilka," Jack said "Trust me, please."

Sitting down on a chair, Grilka gave up. What else could she do but trust the stupid human she called Dorf. She retreated into her own thoughts and sobbed quietly. O'Brien placed a hand on her shoulder trying to comfort her.

"I have to go see to some things." O'Brien said. "I will be back. Lieutenant Killpack will take care of you until I return."

Grilka nodded and continued to cry. She wanted to go home. She wanted a place to actually call home. It was all very confusing and frightening at the same time for her. Grilka wanted a place of rest and peace. Would she find it among aliens? She did not know.

As Major O'Brien left Grilka's quarters he contacted the Med Bay. "O'Brien to Allen, can you prescribe some sedatives to Grilka? She's pretty upset."

Allen's voice came over the comm unit. "Sure, but I don't know how they'll react to Dubor physiology. I'll have to run some tests."

"Keep me posted. O'Brien out." The comm line went silent.

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The main observation dome was empty. O'Brien liked to come there when things were quiet or he needed some time to himself. He liked to think things through without being interrupted with station business. It was like his comm unit was never silent for more than an hour at a time. People were always needing something and they usually came to him to provide that something.

Looking up, O'Brien saw the Duborian Warship hovering over the dome. They had sent shuttles to dock with the station instead of docking with it directly. O'Brien figured it was a tactic to keep them from having to disarm their weapons and powering down their engines. This way they could go at a moments notice if need be. He didn't blame them, they were alien to each other after all. It was just a little too much to think about right now, and the last thing he wanted to do was think.

“It’s so peaceful tonight.” A woman said as she entered the dome.

O’Brien turned to see the familiar face of Madison, the dock foreman, enter the room with him. “Did the doc clear you to leave Med Bay? I heard some things went down recently.”

Madison nodded her head. “Yes, the doc gave me permission.” She said. “Even if he didn’t give me permission I wouldn’t have stayed in Med Bay for more than a day. You know how it can be sir.” She smiled. Her green eyes gave off a slight glow, a residual effect of being inhabited by the alien species.

“What brings you here tonight Miss Park?” O’Brien asked.

Madison hesitated for a moment, and then told O’Brien her reason for seeking him. “I had the computer track you down. I needed to tell you something. Don’t trust the Dubor. I know they had you captive, but their intentions are not good.” She explained. “That creature that invaded my body was afraid of them. Just being in the same star system as their home planet gave it the creeps.”

“What can you tell me about them.” Jack asked.

“Not much, I have these faint flashes of memories. All I can tell you is they are dangerous.” Madison said. “I’m sorry, I can’t tell you any more than that.”

Great, Jack thought, he had the gut feelings of someone who had an alien encounter. Whoever said this job was easy was lying. “Thank you for bringing this to my attention Miss Park.” O’Brien said. “I wasn’t planning on throwing them a party, that’s for sure. They consider us to be cattle. If that’s not telling you something, I don’t know what will.”

Madison nodded and excused herself from the dome leaving O’Brien alone with his thoughts.

It didn’t take long for the Dubor to start causing trouble on the station. Soon, O’Brien was called down into security to take care of a matter.

As O’Brien entered the security office, he saw Ketish waiting for him.

“Cattle, you dare arrest one of my men.” Ketish greeted O’Brien.

Jack didn’t like being called cattle, he preferred Dorf over that. Anything but cattle would do. “We’ve been over this Ketish. We are not cattle. My name is Major Jack O’Brien.” He said correcting the, for lack of a better term, delegate.

Ketish sighed. “If you must insist on calling yourself that major, I will comply.” He said as a gesture of good faith. “How long will you hold my men in these cages?”

Cages. O’Brien thought. Compared to what he had experienced in orbit of Dubor, these holding cells weren’t even close to cages. For one they provided a bed, a place to sleep instead

of cold concrete flooring. Two prisoners were provided hot meals and a shower if they wished to have one. It was much more civilized than what the Dubor had to offer.

Picking up a chart, O'Brien read over the charges and shook his head. Disorderly conduct. Nothing too serious, but serious enough to have the accused sleep it off for a few. "From the looks of things, your men can't hold their liquor. They caused some trouble in the gambling sector of the Main Gallery. We don't take kindly to that."

Ketish waived his hand. "Your alcohol was obviously the problem. The cause of our misfortune and the accident that happened. If you want I will pay for the damages in whatever currency you fancy. But I will not apologize for my men. They were doing only what was expected by your customs."

Raising a hand to his face, O'Brien looked shocked. Their customs. Really. That's the game plan Ketish was going to go with? He obviously didn't understand Earth customs or the way things were run on the station. O'Brien would have to teach it to him.

"I ought to throw you in the brig." O'Brien said. "You stand accountable for your men, do you not?"

Ketish nodded his head. "Yes. But I wasn't here. I was on my ship otherwise occupied. You have no right to arrest me."

"Maybe not." O'Brien said. He rubbed his chin with his hand. The beard that had grown over the past thirty days was itchy. He would have to do something about it. "But I can order your people to return to your ship. Your vacation time is over."

"In order of cooperation between our two peoples," Ketish said. "May I suggest you release these prisoners over to me. I will make sure they are punished according to our own laws, and as I said we will pay for damages done to your station." He thought it was a good compromise. Earth would get paid for damages done to their casino, and he would get his people back.

O'Brien knew it was against his better judgment to let the Dubor go, but the offer was intriguing. There was nothing in the books about what to do in this situation. Any governments they had existing relations with, the matter was simple. He would have to figure out some kind of system. But for now, he would just have to let them go hoping Ketish was telling the truth about paying for damages.

"I want you off my station within the hour." O'Brien said. "The lieutenant will release your men. Make sure it doesn't happen again."

Ketish stood from his chair and bowed. "Most gracious major." He said. "We will not bother you again in this manner." He exited the security office.

Killpack whistled. There was something you didn't see every day. Either O'Brien had gotten soft or there was something more sinister at foot here. He wanted to find out, but wasn't sure how to go about doing it. He wasn't buddy buddy with the major as some of the other officers under his command. Killpack would have to play it safe for now.

"Intelligence gathering." O'Brien mused.

"Sir?" Killpack asked.

"They're gathering intelligence on us lieutenant. Nothing more. They want to see what we would do given a set of circumstances. This won't be the last time we see them, that much is certain." O'Brien said.

* * *

An hour later, O'Brien watched as the Dubor Warship backed away from the station. With her full crew aboard, she was setting a course back to Dubor. Whatever they came here to do, they were done. *Good riddance.* Jack thought. The less of them around the better. He was about to turn off his forward monitor when he noticed a small sphere drop away from the Dubor ship.

"Report. What is that?" O'Brien asked.

Kate looked at her sensor readouts. "Unknown device heading towards the planet's surface sir." She read more information from her console. "It will reach the planet's surface in twenty minutes. I'm not sure what it is."

O'Brien had a feeling he knew what it was. "Life signs?"

"Two Dubor aboard." Kate replied.

"They plan on building a colony." Jack said. "Just like before."

The End